

**Race, Ethnicity, the Courts and Prison,  
Or Disparities in American Justice**

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Lake of the Ozarks, Tan-Tara

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By Lewis Diuguid/*The Kansas City Star*

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for allowing me to share a few thoughts with you today on the topic of “Race, Ethnicity, the Courts and Prison, or Disparities in American Justice.” I think many people in mental health professions have to contend with the overflow of problems from the difference in how men, women, boys and girls are treated because of race, ethnicity and national origin in the law enforcement, judicial system and penal institutions in this state and in this country. That disparity complicates the jobs you have particularly involving people of color. All of these conditions start early for African Americans and they feed from what Kathryn K. Russell delves into in her book, *The Color of Crime: Racial Hoaxes, White Fear, Black Protectionism, Police Harassment and Other Macroaggressions*. Russell wrote:

“The public representation of blackness is a distorted one. The media as well as the academic community are largely responsible for this caricature. Blacks are routinely portrayed as marginal, deviant members of society. The exceptions to these portrayals have been insufficient to alter the public's perception. These deeply rooted images are clearly holdovers from slavery. Our public language on race and crime make it difficult to combat these stereotypical images.”

The media are partly to blame for the criminalized image of black people. The media have left this country with a misimpression of crime and who commits most of the illegal acts, wrote Ray Suarez in his book, *The Old Neighborhood: What We Lost in the Great Suburban Migration: 1966-1999*. The result is a continuing white flight from urban cores and a fear of African American males. Suarez wrote:

``The exaggerated feelings of vulnerability to crime among the white middle class have helped remake the urban landscape in the last 50 years. But that feeling of vulnerability does not square with who really suffers from crime. In a country in which 70 percent of the people call themselves white, only 49 percent of crime victims are actually white. The black population of the United States floats around 12 to 13 percent; crime victims are black 49 percent of the time.

Thanks to American television (and especially the news), with its unquenchable thirst for norming random, freaky crime, citizens in all kinds of communities feel their chances of becoming victims of crime are far greater than they actually are. The conviction that something terrible is about to happen drives the scare talk of crime, dangerous urban youth, and dangerous communities."

So the media implant the stereotype of African American males being criminal. Suarez wrote that the media also do their best to exclude people of color from images that the media project. He wrote:

“The city lives in an ambivalent place in our national consciousness. The writers and casts of (hit 1990s television programs) ‘Seinfeld,’ ‘Mad About You,’ ‘Friends,’ ‘Ellen,’ ‘Caroline in the City,’ and other popular television programs extol the excitement, sophistication, variety and sheer with-it-ness of urban life. But these shows seem to exist in urban environments unrecognizable to millions of their nonfictional neighbors. (You could say the same thing about today's hit television shows such as ‘Friends,’ which just had massive audiences watching its last episode this month. There’s also ‘Sex in the City,’ ‘Six Feet Under’ and ‘The Sopranos.’) Most Latinos in the United States live in large urban areas. Most blacks in the United States live in large urban areas. The networks beam their vision of white urbanity and cozy

consumption into the homes of millions of white suburbanites without having to recognize or apologize for the real black-and-brown world that exists just beyond the camera frame occupied by Jerry, George and Kramer.

The dramatic landscape is another matter entirely. Unlike the melanin-free zone of Caucasian sit-comedy, the urban jungles of 'Homicide,' 'The Commish,' 'NYPD Blue,' (and today's different 'Law and Order,' shows 'The Corner' 'OZ' and 'Crime Victim's Unit') and other programs feature brown and black suspects. The membrane between late prime-time and your local news grows thinner with each ratings period, as the clenched jawed realism of black-and-brown urban pathology segues easily into the mayhem of local news. It must be a comfort to an increasingly suburbanized reportorial staff, management and audience that the 'alleged' wild men in their center city are far, far away. There may be a simple explanation for the unreality of comedic television's all-white New York: So many millions of Americans live segregated

lives that this white planet of Manhattan never provokes a  
`What's wrong with this picture?'”

It’s also amazing that this goes on, that television and the media reinforce segregation with great, yet quiet vigor as the nation celebrates the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education decision, which ended legal segregation.

I need to expose you to a way to deconstruct the media so you can more clearly examine the impressions they leave on the general population. This is important because the media talk to each of us more than any real person does. Their messages provide us with the vocabulary that we use today, what products we buy and what we value as people and as a nation. But it is important to deconstruct the media into their five functions to see the imbedded message that lies within the thousands of words and images that we consume every day. I am not making this up. This is documented material pulled from Clint Wilson's and Felix Gutierrez's book *Race*,

*Multiculturalism and the Media and their first book, Minorities and Media.* From the books, those five media functions begin with:

-- Surveillance. The media go into areas to check out what's going on in the community. The press go where normal people won't go or don't have the time to explore. They depend on the press to do the work.

-- Correlation is the second function. The media interpret and connect the dots for readers about what's taking place where they live. Let's say the Department of Housing and Urban Development has a problem. The same problem exists within the Smithsonian. The City of Washington, D.C., has it, too, but people there discover a solution. By telling about the problem and the solution, the media enable everyone to benefit from knowing that the problem isn't just in one place, and those with the problem also share in the solution. So you have problem-solvers here and a sense of misery loves company.

-- Transmission is the third media function. It is the socialization function of the media in which the media transmit society's norms and values and hold certain individuals up for praise or honors so others will strive to be

like them. You see this in stories about people who have won awards or who have done something honorable or noteworthy.

-- The fourth media function is entertainment, and it is huge. It is there for pure diversion or enjoyment. It includes sports, features stories, advice columns, movies, music, videos and theater.

-- Last but not least, is the economic media function. This is the engine. it pays for everything. Don't minimize this. It's the one in which the media project through advertising messages about products and services that are valued in your community and show the people who use those products and services.

What's interesting is when you ask yourself in which of these areas African Americans show up in numbers representative of them consisting of 13.3 percent of the U.S. population of 291 million Americans. Then you start to see that black people stand out big in surveillance in the media checking out what black people are doing wrong in America. And they are huge in entertainment as they dribble a ball, throw a ball and catch a ball or sing and dance to entertain the rest of america. But African



Americans are mostly invisible in the other three media functions of transmission, correlation and economics. Hispanics, who represent 13.8 percent of the population and now are the nation's largest minority group at 40 million people show up big in surveillance, but they are invisible in the other four functions of the media. Asian Americans and Native Americans are invisible altogether. Gays and lesbians show up only in surveillance. In this post-Sept. 11, 2001, world that we live in, Muslims and Arab Americans now show up big time also in surveillance. But what's interesting is how women fare in the media. They represent about 52 percent of the population but only show up in representative numbers in the surveillance, entertainment and economic functions of the media. They hit big in economics because women are responsible for 80 percent of the purchases of all households in this country, and that amounts to trillions of dollars. The negative or deficient depictions of people of color burden them with negative and deficient outcomes throughout their lives. They always have to prove stereotypes wrong when the majority doesn't carry that burden.

I think for the sake of examining segments of our population you have to ask yourself where do white males show up in the media. They represent about 38 percent of the population, but they also populate and control the media. It is no secret that they show up in all five of the media functions in numbers that are representative of their percentage of the population. And that's great. I am all for that. It gives everyone an accurate depiction of white males. Surveillance tells us there are problems, but correlation and transmission also reveal that there are also many problem-solvers among them and people whom we want our children to emulate. Entertainment tells us that they are active in sports, comedy, dramas, singing and dancing, but all of them are not just for the entertainment of everyone else. And the economic function tells us that they are among the producers, manufacturers, service providers and consumers that we are to revere. All of that is good. But I think we have to begin to ask ourselves why others can't also have accurate depictions of themselves like this, too.

What's fascinating to me is that if people of color were to show up only in the economic, correlation and transmission areas of the five media

functions, that would change the dynamics of how they are viewed in our society from being problem people who as a group are to be suspected, doubted, mistrusted and avoided at all costs, to individuals who can benefit everyone because of their merit and their mettle.

But people of color suffer the outcome of these media lies from conception to grave. I say conception because often involved are teens having babies. They suffer poor or no prenatal care, which leads to low birth weights, poor nutrition and arrested development. But that's not all. the Urban League of Greater Kansas City put together a State of Black Kansas City report titled ``Justice Jailed." It cites disparities in how African Americans at an early age are treated by law enforcement, the judicial and penal system in this country. It amounts to racial profiling on steroids. The Urban League's ``Lifting the Least and Left Behind" report said:

“Research has shown, in virtually every state, minority youths are over-represented at every stage of the juvenile justice system, particularly in secure confinement, and they receive disparate treatment by the system. In 1997, although they represented just 34 percent of the U.S. adolescent population, minority youths represented 62 percent of the youths in detention, 67 percent of the youths committed to public facilities and 54 percent of youths committed to private facilities.”

On April 25, 2000, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency issued a report (titled), ‘And Justice for Some,’ commissioned by the Youth Law Center's building blocks for youth initiative, showing major racial disparities in juvenile justice systems throughout the United States. The report found that African Americans comprised 15 percent of the nation's youth under age 18 but represented 26 percent of juvenile arrests, 31 percent of referrals to juvenile court, 44 percent of the detained

population, 34 percent of youth formally processed by the juvenile court, 46 percent of youth judicially waived to criminal court, 32 percent of youth adjudicated delinquent, 40 percent of youth in residential placement and 58 percent of youth in state adult prison."

In a section titled ``Misery in Missouri" the Kansas City Urban League report said that in Jackson County, Missouri, African Americans ages 10 to 16 constituted 31 percent of the population for that age group, but the rate of confinement for them was 64 percent. I also noted in a May 8, 2002, column in *The Kansas City Star* on this topic that Jackson County Family Court records showed blacks in that age group made up 66 percent of those admitted to detention facilities and 76 percent of those sent to residential placement. Most people mistakenly think that blacks commit the most and the worst crimes and therefore should be locked up and given the harsher sentences. But that statistically isn't true. Jackson County is trying to determine ways to equalize the system that spares many white youths from going through the worst of the criminal justice system but is

all too quick to put black people of all ages under the jail and keep them there.

I think we have to examine here what the outcomes of this type of disparity might be for people of color. I heard a black man, who was an ex-offender, speak to a group of inmates a few years ago in Kansas City. He said he preferred to have a white racist probation or parole officer than someone who was black like him. It was a startling admission, and it was difficult for the mostly black audience of ex-offenders to stomach. But the speaker said the reason he preferred to have a white racist probation or parole officer lording over him was because that person knew who had the real power. The white officer had the real power, and he did not mind exercising it when it came to taking risks with the ex-offender whom he supervised. He knew that he could talk down to the black ex-offender, address him with racial slurs, and yet, he, the officer, would remain in complete control. But the ex-offender said that a black probation or parole officer, on the other hand, would be timid about taking risks with any black ex-offender. The minority officer would be nice. He would treat

the ex-offender better. He wouldn't disrespect him or use racial slurs. But he would not recommend that any black ex-offender be in any special programs or move toward being completely on his own for fear that the minority officer would be questioned, get slapped down, be reprimanded or fired by his white supervisors. So there is a paralysis of fear gripping the minority probation and parole officer, according to the ex-offender, compared with the power and freedom to act by the racist white officer. Ladies and gentlemen, that is a highly dysfunctional system, and it's not just confined to the law enforcement, judicial and penal professions. In this country, too often, it's everywhere. I think it says for the purposes of our work today that as mental health professions you have the power to help people see this dynamic system of continuing oppression and help people see that they can dismantle it. If people of color can overcome their fear they can have a stronger voice in their future. I think all of us want ex-offenders to return to their communities and become good, civically involved, taxpaying citizens. Just saying no it's not a problem is not good enough for anyone especially ex-offenders.

There are other negative effects of the disparate justice in America. It's often unseen and unspoken, however, I get to hear it from people who call, e-mail and send letters to me. I call them ``my fans." Believe it or not, they freely and without inhibitions say that the extra police patrols and severe treatment of the judicial and penal systems that African Americans get is one form of reparations for the black community. These everyday people are reinforcing our societal norms, and in this country those norms include disparate treatment for people of color. I see it as a way of subjecting one segment of the population to a government enforced police state, hamstringing the development of the people that the dragnet surrounds. It also feeds into the biases that we pick up from the schools and the media about African Americans. Let me give you an example from the feedback that I get from readers when I write about the inequities that black people must live with:

``When a `black' moves into an area -- here comes his black friends and relatives, and then we whites are frightened from there on. Who commits 90 percent of the crime in Kansas City



-- blacks -- and it's frightening to be around such. I believe in segregation and always have -- you are not in my comfort zone and also you bring drugs, drive-by shootings, rape and killings into the community. Is there any wonder why we do not care for you people!!? True, not all whites are nice people, but I don't want to be around them either. Yes, I know a few nice, refined blacks, but I'd still rather be around those like me. I'm sick of February being ruined by 'black history month,' and I detest 'Martin Luther King' and the whole month of January being shoved down our throats -- Even our presidents never have such coverage on their birthdays. And this business about the 'Confederate flag' flying on the state building in the South, if you don't like it, don't look at it!! That flag is their heritage and is their right. If you are all so up on African heritage, go there to live -- we'd love to lose all of you -- would mean less crime here! Over there, every 26 seconds, someone is dying of aids -- would you want that? Look at the Kansas City school system -- those schools (Southwest High) dropped to low after

transporting all the blacks to white schools, instead of going to the schools in their area. This is what ruined the Kansas City schools. I am sorry sir, but this is how I feel, along with many people. Stay out of our areas and our schools, and we'll leave your kids alone."

The one that follows also is among my favorites in explaining why black people might be Americans, but there are a lot of people out there who just don't want us here.

``Mr. Diuguid: you blacks just don't get it. You are so naive to think that others dislike you just because of the color of your skin. That is irrelevant! There are far more other legitimate reasons for civilizations to shun you. I hope you will take the time to consider these thoughts, as they are simple observations meant to help you understand your predicament.

1) Too many blacks demand respect, demand jobs, demand money and benefits. The list of demands goes on. You just don't get it! None of these things are given by demand, they are earned through hard work, discipline, responsibility, motivation and ambition. Here is the number one secret for blacks to truly become a part of America's opportunities: master these character traits and you will blend in with open arms. Take Hispanics for example. Their numbers are increasing greatly, but it is common knowledge that they are hard working and expect to receive only what they earn. They are ruling the construction industries as prized, responsible and hard working men. No one says that about black workers, in fact it is exactly the opposite. Do not worry about them crowding you out of your coveted down-trodden minority status; they will quickly pass you with their self-reliant attitudes and efforts.

2) White people do not have to do anything to hold back blacks. We don't need to. You are doing an excellent job

yourself. Disintegrated families, constant drug use, rejection of education, absence of motivation -- these are your problems, and they are not imposed upon you by whites. Also, by nurturing an entitlement mentality you keep yourselves in the role of slaves, always being provided for by someone else's guaranteed handouts for slackers. Do like everyone else that came to this country, reach down and grab your bootstraps, then pull them as high as you can.

3) The black race has no culture, history or heritage before slavery times. Where are the great black explorers, composers, scientists, theologians, authors, etc.? There are none. Black Americans are only a few generations out of the stone age, and modern Africans are still stone-agers living in the most abject pathetic world-class poverty and disease ridden conditions. I suppose whites are discriminating against them and holding them back from their true potential. It's obvious, your race is not a civilization building one, and the cloths of civilization are ill-fitting and uncomfortable.

4) Education comes hard for the black race and is considered suspect by many blacks. Look at any number of studies and reports for proof. *The Kansas City Star* annually publishes school standings by race, and blacks consistently make up the lowest, essentially illiterate ranks. Education is a fundamental building block for participating in civilization.

5) It's sad to say, but I am not surprised to hear blacks asking for yet another handout in the form of reparations, in their ongoing self-pity victimization routine. Would a people with any self-respect ask for, let alone accept, unearned money for something that never happened to them? The black race seems to have quite a history of accepting unearned money and benefits. One of your colleagues, Mr. Leonard Pitts suggested a figure of \$50,000 for every black. That is over \$1.5 trillion! Where in the world do you think that money would come from? Beggars don't know or care where federal government money comes from. The only form of reparations that blacks could justify is free transportation to the original country of

origin. Please pick up on this suggestion, return in masses to the cherished motherland and build it up into the free homeland you have always dreamed of. Show the world what you can do! Anyway, I secretly support your calls for this blatant extortion attempt of reparations, because you will finally waken the sleeping giant of white outrage, and it will expose your race to be what your enemies have said all along. Even my most liberal give-‘em everything friends are expressing disbelief and outrage. Keep it up!

6) Your insistence on being referred to as African Americans is an embarrassing secret joke that you just don't get. What people in their right mind would ever declare allegiance to the most backward, poverty and disease stricken, primitive, world-class welfare continent on earth? Ha ha! You really don't get it! American citizenship is the envy of civilization yet you degrade even that by your insistence on claiming African heritage ahead of American. Modern African conditions are a perfect example of what happens when the black race is in

charge. For a closer example, refer to Washington, D.C., and the results of the Marion Barry administration. Ha ha!

I normally sign all correspondence but choose not to in this case. You have been successful in one thing, that is, the slandering and name calling of anyone that questions or disagrees with your motives. With the above comments, you and your kind will label me with your most cherished slander, racist. Well, most of the actions of your race, easily justify racist sentiments. So be it, racist is not a dirty word."

So these are people who are happy about the compounding and worsening conditions of segregation, poverty and imprisonment for African Americans and Hispanics. I got this from Jonathan Kozol's book, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*:

``If you want to get your outcasts out of sight, first you need a ghetto and then you need a prison to take pressure off the ghetto. The fact that it doesn't make financial sense is not the

point. Short-term terror and revulsion are more powerful than long-term wisdom and self-interest."

The National Urban League's State of Black America 2003 examines outcomes in terms of the real, social capital and human resources costs to African Americans and black families. It says:

``The massive scale of imprisonment and the long sentences are having disastrous effects of their own. This includes the creation of a large and embittered population of ex-offenders who return to their communities changed for the worse."

Keep in mind that Kansas has close to 10,000 people in prison. Missouri has about 30,000. I have learned from visiting, speaking with and corresponding with people in prisons in Kansas and Missouri at the invitation of the men and prison personnel that the inmates are people, too, just like you and me. But that is not how we treat them. They are made to



feel as if they are outcasts, and most of these individuals are people of color. Again, here is another passage from the Urban League book:

``Mass incarceration in our society does not affect all Americans equally. It disproportionately targets African Americans and Hispanics. For example, while only 12 percent of the total population, black Americans constitute nearly 50 percent of the prison population."

What is lost are many fathers for our children and spouses. Also consider that women constitute one of the fastest growing segments of the people in prison. This quote also is from the Urban League book:

``Each prisoner's family must carry its own burdens and find ways to compensate for the loss. When this phenomenon occurs on a large scale and for an extended period of time, it becomes a transformative force of its own."

Also from the Urban League book, I ask you to think about this and its effect on the mental health of individuals of colors and the communities in which they live:

``Beneath the collective damage are the individuals who are affected. More than half of incarcerated men have children of minor age, and more than half of them were living with their children at the time they were sent to jail or prison. For women, the percentage in both instances is 80 percent.... The incarceration of a parent disrupts children's social environments and the financial stability of their families -- weakening parental bonds and placing severe stress on the caregivers left behind. This often leads to a loss of discipline in the household, and to feelings of shame and anger in children that manifests itself in behavioral problems in and outside of school. Despite widespread awareness of the problem, few systematic efforts exist to minimize the damages of parental incarceration for families and children."

Social scientists have developed a way of measuring the cost on a mass scale in terms of years of life lost. It's a way of looking at potential harm to communities and specific populations after a disaster. For example, the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City that brought down the World Trade Center and killed 2,900 people represented 90,000 years of life lost. That is the loss of productivity of human beings whose lives were tragically cut short, according to the Urban League book. Many of the people in prison are there for nonviolent drug offenses, and they are relatively stagnant in productivity because of their incarceration. The book says that:

``In the United States now, there are more than 450,000 individuals incarcerated for non-violent drug offenses. This number alone equals the years of life lost that would be associated with 15,000 deaths of people in a similar age group. for the last 30 years of drug incarcerations, the total years of life lost is equivalent to more than 200,000 deaths -- twice the

number of U.S. soldiers killed in both the Korean and Vietnam wars."

It may not surprise you because of what I have shared already in the kind of feedback that I get from readers every week that when I wrote about this issue in a column on the racial inequities in the law enforcement, judicial and penal system I was condemned by readers of *The Star* for daring to compare ex-offenders and communities that should be abandoned with the terrorist attacks.

I think this is the kicker, and it also is from *The State of Black America 2003*:

``Mass incarceration systematically undermines black family life on a scale not seen since slavery, by destroying the very social capital needed to prevent crime in America's black community. And, because it affects a substantial segment of African American families, mass incarceration may contribute

to the persistent deficits in the physical, psychological health and well being of the entire black population.... From a public health perspective, we must consider America's high rates of incarceration a negative measure of the society as a whole -- akin to such other societal problems as HIV/AIDS, infant mortality, addiction, homicide or school failure."

Now according to the people who call and write to me, these are people who have to take responsibility for their own actions. The majority community has nothing to do with this situation. Now can you imagine what kind of mental health issues that creates for people of color when they are made to think that poverty and racism are their fault?

The Urban League book points out that ``we must also reduce the collateral damage to the children, families and communities most affected by enacting policies and establishing programs to help them when their family members are sent to prison and when they are discharged from prison." That is why we have come together here today. Not having such

things in my back yard, or NIMBY, is insufficient here. Just saying, ``Hell no" to returning ex-offenders is unacceptable. We must think of better ways to solve this problem.

This jail and prison issue for me is personal beyond me also being an African American man. Some qualities that I was raised with helped get me started in visiting men in prisons. The first involved always responding to letters that I receive. I was taught as a kid to do that because someone who might write to me took a lot of time to put their thoughts down on paper, get an envelope, buy a stamp, look up the address and then mail that message so the least I could do as one human being to another is respond. Another quality that I got from my parents is worth more than money. It simply involves two questions: What can I do and what can I give to help someone else? It follows the simple premise that we are all valued human beings and in helping others we in essence are helping ourselves to grow in value as human beings.

Now let me tell you what I tell the men in prison: I don't go into the locked, razor wire and heavily guarded places in Missouri and Kansas to do anything to try to get anyone inside out. As a journalist for nearly 27 years at *The Kansas City Star* I have written more than my fair share of stories that have chronicled how dozens of men have landed behind bars. So investigating case files, reviewing evidence, seeking DNA testing in cases of presumed wrongful convictions is not what I do. That takes a gargantuan amount of time with no guarantee of a return. That is not what I can do, and that's not what *The Star* would allow me to do. But what I can give the men is my time to listen and my time to talk. That's time that I subtract from home that my wife, Valerie, lets me give to the men.

In putting this session together for you, I thought long and hard about the first time I entered a jail or prison. It was 1978 when I covered the police beat for The Kansas City Times. I visited the city jail and later the Municipal Farm. In 1982-83 when I was the Jackson County Courthouse reporter for The Kansas City Times I got to go to the old county jail atop the courthouse building. It was ancient, and the county faced federal

lawsuits from the prisoners for inhumane treatment. Charles Megerman, then-director of corrections who happens to be a psychologist, invited me in to see the jail for a story I was working on. The detention facility was in sad shape. About a year later Mr. Megerman invited me into the new multistory jail also for a story I was working on. (As an aside, Mr. Megerman was the person who informed me that there is a distinction between the words jail and prison. One is for short-term stays, and the other is for longer term incarcerations. There also is a difference between the words prisoner and inmate. A prisoner is a person in a jail for a short-term stay often involving a waiting period before a trial. An inmate is a person who has been arrested, charged, tried and convicted or has pleaded to a crime and then has been sentenced to prison.) I have tried on many occasions to get some of my colleagues to understand those differences. I hope this helps you. Anyway, editing stints at the paper took me to *The Star's* bureau offices, where I got to experience detention facilities in Wyandotte, Johnson and Cass counties as well as people's anxieties then over those aging jails. New facilities replaced those old lockups. But something about the new Jackson County Jail made it stand out. I didn't



get a chance to write about it in the 1980s, but I filed the idea away in the recesses of my mind and came back to it in 1994 when I started working as an associate editor and metropolitan columnist downtown. If you have seen that eight-story, brick building as you are driving north on oak street near Hospital Hill particularly in the morning you will notice that a vertical shadow running the length of the structure bisects the dark horizontal row of windows about a quarter to a third of the way down the multistory building. What you will see looks like a huge crucifix. I wrote about that in a column for the newspaper along with the ministries of different faiths that preachers and volunteers on the outside take to the men and women inside the jail.

I don't know how much you might know about the newspaper business, but one column like that will cause at least four things to happen in my receipt of many calls, letters and now e-mail messages. The first barrage comes from readers who are mightily pissed off that I would have the stones to write something nice about people who have been locked up. The overwhelming public attitude is people who commit crimes should be

put away indefinitely and stacked high like cord wood. I actually heard one of our longtime lawmakers make that statement at an open meeting. When I quoted him people responded in a right-on manner. Can you believe it? Anyway, the second response comes from crime victims. They take any kindness toward people behind bars as a personal attack against them, and they relive their victimization. The third response, though often in a relative whisper, comes from people of conscience who are pleased that the dehumanization of other people has been turned around. The media often pick up the standards, mores and folkways of the community and project that back in the pages of newspapers, magazines, and on television, radio and the internet. If those standards include racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, elitism and biases against people in jails and prisons then those things also will be what the media will reflect. Anyone who steps out of the traditional way of doing things in the media often puts his or her job at risk. The thunderous negative feedback doesn't just end with the journalist who stepped out of line. It often goes all the way up to the editor and the publisher. Been there done that; still doing it. But for the 17 years that I have been writing a column for *The Kansas City*

*Star*, I have lived by the first rule of column writing, and that is there are no rules. The fourth response comes from the families and from the people in jails and prisons, and that feedback is mostly positive.

I started to get all four forms of feedback in 1994 after I wrote about the cross at the Jackson County Jail. Men at the Lansing Correctional Facility in Kansas wanted me to know about a multi-step program there that was helping them reform themselves. I went and wrote about that. I also learned while I was there that many inmates once free of the system disavow that aspect of their lives. It's as if it never happened. The mental health issue that creates is denial and it allows the nation's growing prison industrial complex, which incarcerates more than 2 million people now to continue unchecked because no one who has been on the inside is willing to speak of the abuses of this great nation locking up more people than any other country in the world. And more than half of all those persons in prison are blacks and Hispanics.

Yes, when I write about these concerns I get hammered by readers. But what I learned was fascinating, and I thought people needed to know what rehabilitation efforts were taking place. You see, I also learned that there is a difference between prisons and correctional facilities. Correctional facilities are supposed to work toward the reform of the individuals who land behind bars so they will return to be productive members of society. That takes more than just concrete walls, razor wire and insensitive guards. So the men at the Lansing Correctional Facility reached out to me because of what they saw I had done in Jackson County.

I guess the lesson there is that the more you do the more you realize what you can do, and you grow with everything that you do -- especially when you help others overcome often subconscious and sometimes conscious discrimination of the law enforcement, judicial and penal systems. I have found as a journalist that the greater my exposure to people who are different only enhances my ability to better communicate with others. Each encounter makes me better, stronger, more empathetic,

more knowledgeable and wiser. I learn from every encounter -- good and bad -- every one is golden.

My initial involvement and connection with the men in the Lansing program prompted men with the African Awareness Organization in the Lansing prison to also reach out to see whether I would come give a speech to them. The men pick the topics. They pick the themes. I have a couple of speeches at prisons in Missouri coming up in June and July. I try to bring the men something on a topic or theme that they set and deliver something of interest to them. It also must inspire them to work to repair themselves and prepare themselves for their eventual release. I always keep what I say real and let them know they must contend with bias in the system. I have written dozens of speeches and delivered them in person to the men and their families in prisons. I do it for the sincere reason that I learn something from the men each time I go to share some thoughts with them. Their strength energizes me. I have told them often that it's because they have been down in places like prisons that they can better understand and appreciate what being up is. Because they have known tremendous

sadness in their lives, they know what real happiness is. Because they have had to live in prison with few freedoms, they can best appreciate what true freedom is. Because they have had to do a lot with a little in their lives and in their time behind bars, they have the potential to be our most inventive and productive citizens upon their release, and our urban communities need that innovation and productivity now more than ever. I tell the men that, too. The first prison speech that I gave was on Oct. 4, 1994. If you have ever given a speech to men in a prison there are four things you can count on: Number 1: you will have a captive audience. These guys really want to hear what you have to say, and they really dissect everything you have to share. Number 2: there is a definite start time and a certain end. No speech in prison goes on and on. Number 3: the men are really bright, and they are looking for something that will stimulate them intellectually, free their spirit and inspire them. Some of you may have read Dr. Carter G. Woodson's book *The Miseducation of the Negro*. If you haven't, check it out if you get a chance. Dr. Woodson was the person who started Negro History Week in the 1920s, which in 1976 became the Black History Month that we celebrate today. One of the

things Dr. Woodson wrote in that 1930s book was that schools are established to inculcate the masses. Like the media they instill in young people the values of our larger society. As I said earlier, if that includes the supremacy of whites over people of color, then that will be among the lessons that will be taught, too. Dr. Woodson writes that the more African American children learn in school about white America, the greater the tendency there will be in those children to give up the things they know about black America. The more compliant black students will accept that without questions. But they are not necessarily the brightest black students. Those students who chaff and rebel against the assimilation knowing that they will never be fully accepted in this country are the ones who struggle, become frustrated and often fail at school after school starts to fail them. But they are not children who are incapable of learning. Quite the opposite. Often they are the ones who are the brightest and realize that what's being taught is something that they just can't stomach. My dad who taught chemistry and physical science to would-be teachers for nearly 40 years at Stowe, then Harris and finally Harris-Stowe Teachers College in St. Louis said there are no dumb children incapable of

learning. There are only teachers who have failed to reach and teach those children. Education aims at average students in the massive middle of the spectrum. Those who are the brightest or the slowest at the opposite extremes of the educational spectrum are the ones who often aren't reached. My fourth point is if the inmates like what you have to say they definitely will ask you to come back. Keep in mind that these are people who have committed myriad crimes from murder, to sex offenses, to robbery, to drug use and distribution. But they mean you no harm. What's often interesting is how the older men in prison complain about the younger ones inside not caring, being unruly and not wanting to learn. So yes, there is a generation gap in prisons, too.

What's also interesting is the people who run the prisons want people like you and me to come there to speak and engage the men in meaningful ways. I wrote in a column after taking a flight to a journalism conference after the Sept. 11, 2001, tragedy. I wrote that people entering prisons have to shed everything they have that's metal and have guards go through their stuff just as travelers now are subjected to extreme security searches at



airports. But I have found that the security officers in prisons treat people a whole lot better as guests in prisons than the security at airports do to travelers paying for the privilege of flying on airplanes.

Anyway, speaking at the Lansing prison led me to write a column about that experience because it was so different and new -- and what is news, but something new. I have visited and written columns in *The Kansas City Star* about the prisons in El Dorado, Kan., Jefferson City, Moberly, St. Joseph and Cameron, Mo. Some have been about programs that the prisons offer. The first time I went to one of the two prisons in Jefferson City, it was to follow a group of juveniles behind bars for a program during which the inmates explained to them in the toughest of terms what it was like to be behind bars. The teen-agers were all bluster on the van ride there. But they were as quiet as church mice on the drive back. I actually started going to the prison in Moberly when a man there wrote to me. My habit as I said earlier is to always write back. He invited me to speak there during a program that followed the October 1995 million man march. That was when hundreds of thousands of black men from

throughout the country converged on Washington, D.C., to answer Nation of Islam Minister Louis Farrakhan's call for a new day of peace, responsibility and reconciliation for black America. I realized then when I went to speak at the Moberly prison that there is a new black community behind bars largely because our society has spent the last 20 years concentrating on building prisons in what again is called the prison industrial complex and filling the cells with a hugely disproportionate number of black people. The prison industrial complex is like the military industrial complex that President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned the country about. The military industrial complex involves defense contractors dictating policy to our government so that the war machine, consuming money and people to keep fighting wars, will continue to grow. The prison industrial complex is similar in that. Now throughout the country we have prisons that are run by private corporations that are traded on the New York Stock Exchange. They make their money by building prisons, getting contracts with state, local and federal governments and then filling the cells with people. The more people they hold, the more money they return to stock holders. They also put those

individuals behind bars to work collecting other funds from lucrative labor contracts. The men in prisons call this the new slavery in America, and I think they are right.

I wrote in a column recently in *The Kansas City Star* on a Justice Policy Institute report titled ``Cellblocks or Classrooms? The Funding of Higher Education and Corrections." It said more black men are behind bars than in college. I had heard that before, but this study provided numbers. Of about 2 million people behind bars in 2000, 791,600 were black compared with 603,032 black men in institutions of higher education. What's more interesting is that in 1980, 143,000 black men were in state and federal prisons and 463,700 were in colleges and universities. So there has been a shift toward locking up black men. Missouri and Kansas each has a disproportionate number of black men behind bars, and Missouri follows the national trend of locking up more black men than it has enrolled in college; Kansas does not.

That brings me to another point, and that is if you are invited into prisons to talk with the men, please don't try to B.S. them. These men are extremely intelligent, and they will see right through it. I always tell them the truth. But I also tell them things that will give them inspiration and hope. I always take them something different to ponder, and I always leave the text of my speeches with them. Those words get photocopied and read and re-read dozens of times by dozens of people. I often call the men our undiscovered intellectuals. It reinforces in them what they know. Again, they are bright. But no one has ever verified that fact for them, and let them know that their intellect has been noticed. I also try to do what my mother learned from her mother, who was a social worker and that is to never use profanity with the men. These words are what they have heard repeatedly throughout their lives with people cursing them. I talk with them as intelligent human beings whom I respect, and they respond well to that. The men visibly stand a little taller afterward and talk with more certainty. In the prisons I can tell you for sure that I have never been hugged so much by so many people. These guys are ecstatic about receiving visitors. The ones who attend the programs that the NAACP

and Muslim groups put on are voracious readers. They go through the newspapers and magazines cover to cover, and they are eager to engage visitors in conversations about what they have read and about what's really going on outside. At the Moberly prison and at Algoa Correctional Center in Jefferson City, I had guys who I knew on the outside come up and remind me that our paths had crossed years before they got locked up. We had been in college together and had many of the same friends. Another guy I met in prison used to work at my dad's chemical company in St. Louis. I used to supervise men like him. Each for me is an example of ``But for the grace of god go I."

My wife, Valerie, is one of the toughest, most skeptical persons I know. But the inmates at the Lansing prison melted her toughness when they sent me home one day with a cake for her and my daughters, Adrienne and Leslie. The greatest gifts often come from people who have the least to give. These guys are well-read in the Bible and the Qu'ran. They know that old biblical saying that to those whom much has been given, much then is expected. So if you go into the prisons please understand that these

guys will expect something uplifting from you. But also be prepared for their gifts. I have received several certificates and plaques from the men at the prisons in Moberly, Alcoa and Cameron. The men in those branches of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People also have given gifts to schools, veterans' groups and children's charities from the few dollars they receive for their work behind bars. Again, they have so little to give, which makes it mean a whole lot to those who get the gifts.

I have told the men on several occasions about my view of freedom. They are relieved to know that they are not the only ones who are not free. To me freedom comes in three flavors. There is intellectual freedom, and that involves the ability of individuals to study, read, write, do math, science and be lifelong learners. There is economic freedom in which we all work toward the day when we're no longer wage slaves but can be independent and self-sustaining. And then there is spiritual freedom in which we practice our faith, revel in it and share that spirit of kindness and giving with others. I let the men know that I am still striving to be free,

and that I hope they will continue to do the same thing, too, whether on this side of the razor wire or theirs.

I have shared with the men many of the stories I have heard my parents tell growing up. One was of a slave named Thomas Fuller. He has been credited in science books as being one of the greatest mathematicians of all times. He had the ability to go about his chores for his master but also to do complex math problems in his head. His master would hire him out to other people just for that purpose. I have told the men in the prisons that like that slave, just because they are behind bars, doesn't mean that they can't use their heads to better themselves.

I have told the men about Terence. He was a brilliant philosopher and playwright who lived during the Roman Empire. Terence also was black, and Terence was a slave. But he was intensely intelligent. His Roman master realized that and made sure that Terence became educated and then freed him so that his brilliance would continue to soar, and it did. I keep a quote from Terence on my bulletin board at work. I also have shared that

quote with men in prisons. This quote ran in *The Kansas City Star* a few years ago as a "Thought For The Day." The paper that quote is on is old and yellow now, but the quote remains just as meaningful. Terence's four words are still quite powerful today. Terence said, "Fortune favors the brave." These are times when the many men in prison need to be brave for themselves, brave for their families and brave for our community in putting their many talents to productive ends as good citizens. We are very fortunate in this state that men who have been in prison do not lose their right to vote in Missouri. I urge them and others urge them to re-establish that connection to the political power of voting when they are released.

Many ministers, church women, teachers, principals, gospel choirs and even Jackson County Circuit Judge Jon Gray go into the prisons, too. Again, they understand that these are people who are part of our community. These men need to know that life for them on the outside can be better for them than it was before they went to prison if they take the time they have in prison to prepare themselves for their return. That takes



studying and quiet time to plan their rebirth. In prison, some men also sing, and it is really powerful. Art often flows from tortured souls. Kansas has an Arts in Prisons program, and I have written about that, too. In Moberly at the NAACP functions, the men also sing the best rendition of James Weldon Johnson's ``Lift Every Voice and Sing" that I have ever heard. That song has been called the Black National Anthem. But often outside of prison it is sung at a funereal tempo. These men sing it the way it was meant to be sung -- in an uplifting, prideful way.

In addition to the many hugs that the men give, they want to know what's taking place outside. A special thing that I and you can share with them is not only what is happening in the community, but also what's going on in the community of other prisons. I let them know who has called to tell me he is out and doing well. I tell them about the happenings elsewhere, which prisons are having programs for Kwanzaa, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Black History Month, Independence Day and NAACP Freedom Fund Banquets. Information is golden. They like to know they are not alone in what they are trying to accomplish. But they

need to know as much as you or I can tell them about life on the street.

Many of these guys don't know about ATM machines, the proliferation of credit cards, debit cards, cell phones, computer equipment and video cameras watching people's every move in businesses and on street corners. Knowing helps them keep from making mistakes that might land them back in prison.

What's really cool is to have one of the men come up to me on the streets of Kansas City and shake my hand, hug me and remind me that I had given them inspiration and hope on the inside, which helps them on the outside. One man came up to me at a Wal-Mart in Kansas City. Another caught me when I was ringing a bell on a street corner for the Salvation Army. Many men have called me at work just to let me know how they are doing and how much the visits and speeches meant to them. Those are wonderful encounters, and I recommend that anyone get involved if asked if you have the heart for such volunteer efforts. Recently a man I got to know in the prisons of Missouri was released and hired as a reporter and columnist by the *Kansas City Call* newspaper. He is doing well, and I was

happy to report that to the men at the Moberly Correctional Center's NAACP Black History Month program.

The last thing that I want to share with you is a passage that I copied from a book in 1984. I've kept the thought in my wallet penciled on the back of a business card. To me this message embodies what I have always truly believed. It goes like this:

``I shall pass through this world but once. if therefore there be any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do, let me do it now; let me not defer it or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

I hope Stephen Grellet's passage means as much to you as it has to me. We must in our own small ways work consistently and persistently to forge the fairness, the social justice and the equity that we would want for everyone in these tumultuous times.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much.

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